

# Virginia Department of Historic Resources

## PIF Resource Information Sheet

This information sheet is designed to provide the Virginia Department of Historic Resources with the necessary data to be able to evaluate the significance of the property for possible listing in the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. This is not a formal nomination, but a necessary step in determining whether or not the property could be considered eligible for listing. Please take the time to fill in as many fields as possible. A greater number of completed fields will result in a more timely and accurate assessment. Staff assistance is available to answer any questions you have in regards to this form.

### General Property Information

For Staff Use Only

DHR ID #: 047 0043

Property Name(s): "Amblers" or Coke-Watts House 047-0043

Property Date(s): 1852, c. 1930, c. 1954 ☐ Circa ☐ Pre ☐ Post Open to Public? ☐ Yes ☐ Limited ☒ No

Property Address: NONE City: Zip:

County or Ind. City: James City County USGS Quad(s): SURRY

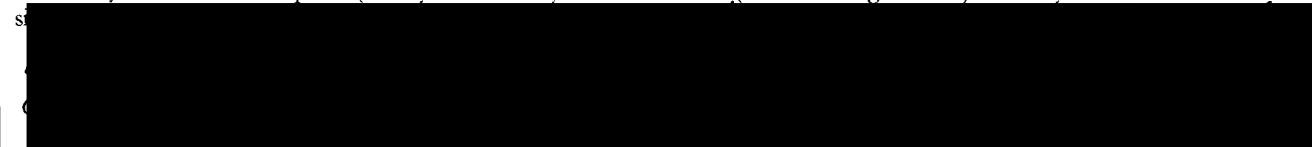
### Physical Character of General Surroundings

Acreage: 98 Setting (choose one): ☐ Urban ☐ Town ☐ Village ☐ Suburban ☒ Rural ☐ Transportation Corridor

Site Description Notes/Notable Landscape Features:

House, outbuildings, garden, and overgrown field overlooking James River - centered in a James City County park -

Secondary Resource Description (Briefly describe any other structures (or archaeological sites) that may contribute to the



Ownership Category: ☐ Private ☒ Public-Local ☐ Public-State ☐ Public-Federal

### Individual Resource Information

What was the historical use of this resource? Examples include: Dwelling, Grist Mill, Bridge, Store, Tobacco Barn, etc...

Dwelling

What is the current use? (if other than the historical use) unoccupied

Architectural style or elements of styles: See attached

Architect, builder, or original owner: See attached

# of stories 2 Condition: ☐ Excellent ☒ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Deteriorated ☐ Poor ☐ Ruins ☐ Rebuilt ☐ Renovated

Are there any known threats to this property? N/A

<b>Resource Component Information</b> Please answer the following questions regarding the individual components of the resource. If the component does not exist, answer "n/a." If you feel uncomfortable in answering the question, please leave the space blank. Photographs of the features can also help our staff identify specific feature components. Usually, priority is given to describing features on the primary (front) facade of the structure.
<b>Foundation:</b> Describe the foundation that supports the structure. Examples include piers, continuous brick, poured concrete. <i>See attached</i>
<b>Structure:</b> Describe the primary structural component of the resource. Include primary material used. Examples include log, frame (sawn lumber), and brick. Also include the treatment, such as a particular brick bond or type of framing, if known. <i>See attached</i>
<b>Walls:</b> Describe the exterior wall covering such as beaded weatherboard or asbestos shingles. <i>See attached</i>
<b>Windows:</b> Describe the number, material, and form of the primary windows. This includes the number of panes per sash, what the sashes are made of, and how the sashes operate (are they hinged or do they slide vertically) Have the windows been replaced? <i>See attached</i>
<b>Porch:</b> Briefly describe the primary (front) porch. List the primary material, shape of the porch roof, and other defining details. <i>See attached</i>
<b>Roof:</b> Describe the roof, listing the shape and the covering material. <i>See attached</i>
<b>Chimney(s):</b> List the number of chimneys and the materials used. Include the brick bond pattern if possible. <i>See attached</i>

**Architectural Description of Individual Resource:** *(Please describe architectural patterns, types, features, additions, remodelings, or other alterations. A sketch of the current floor plan would be appreciated)*

*See attached*

**Significance Statement:** Briefly note any significant events, personages, and/or families associated with the property. (Detailed family genealogies are not necessary.) Please list all sources of information. It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or genealogies to this form. Normally, only information contained on this form will be posted for consideration by the State Review Board.

*See attached*

**Legal Owner(s) of the Property** (For more than one owner, please use a separate sheet.)Mr. ☒ Mrs. ☐ Dr. ☐  
Miss ☐ Ms. ☐ Hon. ☐

JOHN H CHRINIFHX JR

5300 PALMER LN

(Name)

SUITE 1A Williamsburg VA

(City)

(State)

23188

(Zip Code)

John.Chrinifhx@jamescitycountyva.gov

(Email Address)

757-259-5361

(Daytime telephone including area code)

Owner's Signature:

Date:

11-16-12

•• Signature required for processing all applications. ••

In the event of corporate ownership you must provide the name and title of the appropriate contact person.

Contact person:

Daytime Telephone: ( )

**Applicant Information** (Individual completing form if other than legal owner of property)Mr. ☒ Mrs. ☐ Dr. ☐  
Miss ☐ Ms. ☐ Hon. ☐

(CARL LOUNSBURY - ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN)

ALAN C. OUTLAW - ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURAL SOLUTIONS, INC.

109 CROWN POINT ROAD

(Name)

WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

(City)

(State)

23185

(Zip Code)

alainoutlaw@aol.com

(Email Address)

(757) 561-1156

(Daytime telephone including area code)

Applicant's Signature:

Date:

11/14/12

**Notification**

In some circumstances, it may be necessary for the department to confer with or notify local officials of proposed listings of properties within their jurisdiction. In the following space, please provide the contact information for the local County Administrator or City Manager.

Mr. ☒ Mrs. ☐ Dr. ☐  
Miss ☐ Ms. ☐ Hon. ☐

ROBERT MEDAUGH

CA

JAMES CITY COUNTY

(Name)

101 MOUNT BAY RD

(Position)

(Locality)

(Address)

WILLIAMSBURG

(City)

VA 23188

(State)

(Zip Code)

757-253-6603

(Daytime telephone including area code)

Please use the following space to explain why you are seeking an evaluation of this property.

NATIONAL HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE AND  
PRESERVATION FOR PUBLIC USEWould you be interested in the State and/or the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits? Yes ☒ No ☐Would you be interested in the easement program? Yes ☒ No ☐

“Amblers”

Coke-Watts House

James City County, Virginia

### The Setting and historical development of the property

Enveloped by a canopy of large old trees on a rise overlooking the James River at the Jamestown Ferry, Amblers Tract or the Coke-Watts House is an H-shaped, two-story brick dwelling whose plan evolved over two major building campaigns a century apart. Located just to the north of the narrow isthmus that connected Jamestown Island to the mainland, the house sits on land that figured prominently in the first English settlement of the new world. Within a few years of the establishment of Jamestown, a blockhouse and stockade were built on land where the present house is located to protect English livestock from the Powhatan natives. The land remained in public domain until the College of William and Mary sold it to John Ambler following the Revolution. The Ambler family had leased the land since the mid eighteenth century when it was finally absorbed into their holdings, which included a large plantation that incorporated much of Jamestown Island. Until the early 1830s, the main ferry landing across the James alighted at the waterline of this farm with a road leading toward Williamsburg running by the present house. In 1840 the Ambler family sold 375 acres that comprised the heart of this mainland estate to John Coke, a prominent local politician from Williamsburg who served as James City County sheriff in the mid-1840s. Coke erected the core of the present house in 1852.

With farmland running westward to the river and southward to Powhatan Creek, the dwelling remained the center of a large farm that operated through the early twentieth century until it was subdivided in 1917. The Ambler tract retained 169 acres when the house was

renovated around 1930 by Jesse Dimmick who had purchased the property the previous year. Dimmick made a number of improvements to the house and property in the 1930s. In 1941 Robert and Estelle Watts purchased the Ambler tract and by the early 1950s more than doubled the size of the house, adding a wing to the east, a new kitchen, garage, and repaired two antebellum outbuildings just to the east of the main house. They laid out a formal boxwood garden to the north, which enhanced the mature specimen trees that had been established by previous owners around the house and to the north. Now overgrown, the structure of the Colonial Revival garden accentuated the attempt by the Watts to blend the modern additions with the old house and recall the colonial era of which the property is so intimately bound. In 1958 T.R. Vermillion purchased Amblers tract and his heirs sold it to it James City County in 2006.

#### The House: the 1852 plan and ornamentation

When John Coke purchased the 375 acres at the Main in 1840 the value of the property had been assessed at \$300. However, in 1840 the assessment plummeted to \$25, suggesting a catastrophic event, perhaps the burning of a house that may have stood on this property. County tax records indicate that few new improvements occurred for a dozen years following Coke's purchase. However, in 1852 the value of the tract increased substantially to \$6,666.67 "on account of a wharf and \$1,200 on account of buildings." This surely indicates the construction of the core of the present house, whose architecture characteristics suggest a late antebellum period of construction.

Coke erected a two-story, T-shaped dwelling on the brow of the hill. Built with a shallow unheated cellar, all the walls are laid in 1:5 bonding with decorative V-shaped mortar joints. Had the structure been constructed earlier in the second quarter of the century, then it would have

been likely that the front façade would have still been laid in Flemish bond. However, by mid-century, this decorative bonding had finally lost its cache throughout most of Virginia. The bricks measure  $8\frac{1}{4}$  inches in length, 4 inches in width, and  $2\frac{3}{8}$  inches in height. The brickwork is of a uniform red color, accentuated perhaps originally by a red color wash, traces of which are still visible on the decorative  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch wide v-joints. There is no water table and the openings are crowned by shallow segmental arches composed of headers. On the south wall near the west corner of the house, a stretcher brick is inscribed crudely “Janry 16th 1860,” graffiti left by a member of the Dorsey family who had purchased the property from Coke in 1856 or perhaps a visitor to the house.

A good example of the picturesque fashion that was just appearing in Virginia, the house was irregularly massed, with a short blocky, two-story front section with a  $17\frac{1}{2}$ - by 38-foot west wing of equal height set at right angles to and projecting 11 feet out from the entrance block. The 16- by 22-foot front entrance block faces Powhatan Creek to the south while the wing, which probably had an earlier porch attached to the west façade, overlooks the field that ran down to the old ferry on the shoreline of the James River.

In the center of the east entrance block is the front door, which opens into a shallow, 8-foot deep stair vestibule. The open string stair rises along the front wall just east of the doorway, turns along the east wall and then double backs at a landing to alight on the second floor. It has a turned newel post, molded ramped handrail, and tapered turned balusters with simple stair brackets. Behind the entrance vestibule is a small unheated room. A staircase descends to the cellar on the south wall of this room below the upper flight of the main staircase. Presumably, there was a rear doorway leading out of this room, either on the east wall or possibly the rear north wall.

To the west of the entrance lobby, a doorway leads into the larger of the two ground-floor parlor rooms in the west wing. The front south room was the principal entertaining room, measuring nearly 19 feet in length and was heated by an inside chimney on the south gable end. The room is lit by two windows on either side of the fireplace and a pair of windows opposite one another on the east and west walls. A doorway on the west wall leads to a modern porch, which probably replaced an earlier one. A 6-foot wide double doorway on the north end of the room opens into the smaller parlor, which is heated, not on the north gable end, but in the center of the east wall where it backs against the unheated room behind the stair vestibule in the eastern block. Perhaps there was another fireplace, since removed, that once heated this back eastern block room, thus explaining the position of the chimney in this part of the house. The back parlor in the west wing has a pair of windows in the north wall and another pair on the west wall. A doorway on the east wall just south of the fireplace opens into a small lobby formed by the space taken up by the upper flight of the staircase between the entrance vestibule and back room in the east wing.

The second floor plan nearly mirrors that of the main floor, consisting of a pair of bedchambers above the two double parlors in the west wing with smaller unheated rooms in the eastern block. One opened directly into the south bedchamber and may have been a dressing room. The other opens off the passage at the top of the stair landing. Both were converted into bathrooms around 1930 when the house was renovated.

Despite substantial renovations completed around 1930 and substantial alterations made a quarter century later when the house was doubled in size, the original part of the house retains some of its original decorative woodwork. Besides the early staircase, the apertures are trimmed with symmetrical Greek architraves, molded plinths, and corner blocks. The old rooms also

retain a tall molded base. All the original sash were replaced before or during the expansion of the house in the 1950s.

#### Outbuildings:

The 1852 house probably had a number of outbuildings to service it, including a kitchen that no longer stands. What does survive is a twelve-foot square brick smokehouse standing to the east of the dwelling. Laid in a similar 1:5 bond, the building has a doorway on the west façade and a shallow hipped roof covered with a metal roof that was probably put on the building about 1930 when the property was purchased by Jesse Dimmick. The brickwork has been badly repointed and patched with Portland cement since that time where spalling, rising damp, and other failures have occurred. The roof framing survives and is composed of circular sawn timbers deeply blackened and punky from the smoke and salt used in curing meats. The interior walls are lined with a modern layer of coarse plaster, which is deteriorating due to dampness. The floor is modern concrete.

Just to the south of the smokehouse, is a one story brick building measuring 26 feet in length by 15 feet deep with two exterior gable end chimneys. It has two doorways on the long west wall flanked by windows at each end with two dormer windows. There are two windows of rear east wall and a small window in the gables beneath the rake of the roofline. The roof is covered by slate. The brickwork is composed of irregular bonding with traces of a 1:5 arrangement and is much patched like the smokehouse. The chimneys appear to be modern, probably the work of the early 1950s when the entire structure was substantially repaired and the interior gutted to form one large room downstairs. There is a small bathroom on the ground floor with a Standard toilet dating to September 29, 1954, indicative of the period of renovation. The

upstairs is one unheated space sheathed in knotty pine paneling similar to that used downstairs and in one of the rooms in the 1950s addition to the main house. Given its size and location, it is plausible that this structure may have been a quarter when first built in the 1850s, but it has been severely compromised by later alterations and repairs that little but the brickwork survives from the antebellum period if indeed it is that old. The roof is covered with the same slates used on the main house when it was expanded in the 1950s.

#### Renovations: c. 1930

In May 1929 Jesse Dimmick acquired 169 acres of the former Ambler estate and proceeded to make substantial repairs to the house by 1935 as is indicated in an old photograph. From the physical evidence of circular sawn framing members secured by wire nails in the cellar and roof, it appears that he gutted much of the structure, replacing the original floor joists and floorboards, and rebuilt the roof framing. He covered the new roof with strips of metal shingles, which survive beneath the current slate roof on the original section of the main dwelling as well as on the smokehouse. He installed new electrical, heating, and plumbing systems, elements of which survive throughout the house. Although he did little to alter the ground-floor plan, he did convert the two second-floor unheated rooms into bathrooms with tiled floors and walls and porcelain plumbing fixtures, elements of which still survive. A sink is inscribed 9/18/29 and a toilet is stamped 7/10/28, marking them as worthy landmarks in the history of American plumbing.

To give the recessed center entrance a more pronounced and formal appearance, Dimmick added a wooden pedimented frontispiece. The deeply projecting modillion pediment

rests on robust brackets. The west porch was substantially rebuilt as an two-story enclosed space measuring nearly 10 feet in width and 36 ½ feet in length with new foundations, paneled lower walls, and new windows. The porch has eight windows across its west face on both floors.

#### Alterations and expansion: c. 1954

In 1941 Robert and Estelle Watts purchased the property and within a decade after World War II made substantial alterations to the house, more than doubling its size, installing new mechanical systems, and making improvements to the older section. Based on evidence of plumbing and electrical systems, this work appears to have been done by the middle of the 1950s. The entire house was covered with slate shingles. The work was done in a manner that was very sympathetic to the original structure. The Watts added a matching wing to the east side of the original eastern block to create an H-shaped massing across the south front façade. The width of the south front of the new west wing was 17 ½ feet, the same as the south face of the original west wing. It also projected 11 feet beyond the face of the old entrance block like the original wing. The Watts replicated the 1:5 bonding of the original section and carefully selected bricks that matched the deep red color of the original fabric. They replicated the placement, size, and segmental arches of windows of the old wing in the new one and even added a false stack at the apex of the new gable to maintain the symmetry. Although reworked in the 1930s during Dimmick's ownership, the gables in the old west wing rebuilt with a brick veneer to match the gables of the new wing.

The new east wing contained two rooms and two bathrooms (in a roughly 6- by 15-foot 2-story projection from the east façade) on both the first and second stories with a full cellar beneath the new footprint. The cellar is deeper than the original cellar and contains a fireplace in

the south wall and is decoratively paved with broken pieces of tiles as was the style of the period. This space is one large room and was probably used as a game or entertaining room.

On the main floor, there is a bedroom on the south side and a den on the north. The den is finished with full length vertical knotty pine boards redolent of the era. This work matches that in the outbuilding. Upstairs, the wing has two bedrooms with private baths. The Watts also constructed a kitchen on the back side of the house just north of the original unheated room behind the stairway entrance. The kitchen is one story in height and terminates in a wide bow window on the north side. Overgrown with bushes now, this window looked out on a formal boxwood garden that was planted north of the house centered on the two outer walls of the H-shaped wings. The kitchen has a flat roof and a balustraded balcony was built on top with access to it from a doorway cut from an original window in the backside of the original eastern block on the north side. Although the kitchen cabinets and counters were renewed at a later date, the original stove survives.

A one-story garage was erected against north end of the new east wing. It contains a separate apartment lit by dormer windows and accessed by an internal staircase from the garage. Vermillion also constructed an enclosed two-story shed porch against the west façade of the original west wing. To tie the new and old work together, pediments with wooden tympanums were built against the outer slopes of the west and east cross wings.

Watts added new woodwork to the older section of the house, installing a molded surbase and chair board and molded cornice in the two double parlors. He refaced the internal chimneys with raised panel overmantels, molded shelves, and relatively flat architraves around the fireplace openings. Throughout the house, he inserted raised panel doors with oversized colonial reproduction rim locks. The quality of this Colonial Revival trim and hardware is good but not of

the museum quality that was used in the reconstructions at Colonial Williamsburg. It does not try to imitate eighteenth-century work with any degree of fidelity as the moldings are a little too flat and the locks are not properly proportioned. Yet, on the whole, the Watts additions and alterations along with those made earlier by Jesse Dimmick were executed in a sympathetic manner that respected the earlier work. This later period should be considered as contributing to the significance of the site as a late manifestation of Colonial Revival aesthetics that dominated thinking about old estates in Virginia through the first half of the twentieth century.

Carl Lounsbury

November 9, 2012

1935 Model 48  
Ford

113 window coupe

rumble seat  
V8 - hot rod

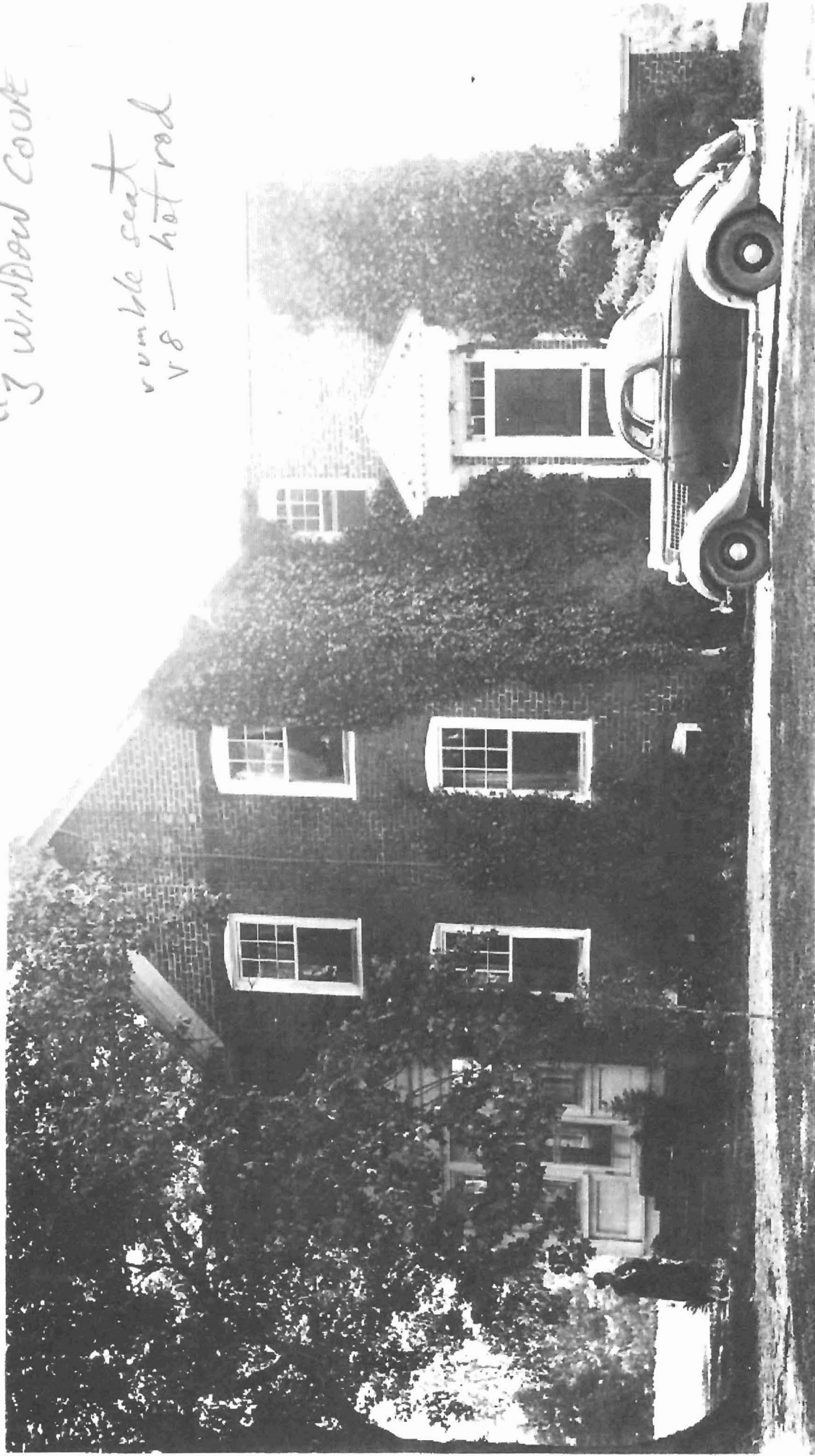


PHOTO TAKEN c. 1938

047-0043 - 2012 PIF

# "Amblers", James City County



This drawing is neither a legally recorded map nor a survey and is not intended to be used as such. The information displayed is a compilation of records, information, and data obtained from various sources, and James City County is not responsible for its accuracy or how current it may be. If discrepancies are found, please contact the Real Estate Assessment Division of James City County, Mapping/GIS Section.

0 70 140 Feet

